

Who Won the Debate in Women Education? Rousseau or Wollstonecraft?

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Abstract

Curriculum framework in the education of children became debatable during the enlightenment. Jean-Jacque Rousseau's treatise, *Emile*, outlined an educational curriculum based on natural rights. Rousseau thought education should be based on espousing and exploring the natural abilities of a person. Therefore, since women have a natural responsibility of care giving, their education should be given in line with helping them to enhance these natural caring abilities. Wollstonecraft, an enlightened philosopher, took on a literary protest against Rousseau's sexual politics in her treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. This paper will show why Wollstonecraft's idea is worth considering, in that it points the way past and out of a world of discrimination to create nondiscriminatory educational concept for future generation. Since discriminatory educational ideologies perpetrates in contemporary societies in diverse fashions, this paper challenges such cultures to rethinking the imperativeness of women education.

Keywords: Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft, Women education, Sexist politics

Acknowledgement: *My deepest appreciation to Abigail Gyasi of Temple University for the encouragement to write about this subject.*

1. Introduction

Emile is a treatise written by the French enlightened author Jean-Jacque Rousseau. In this popular work, Rousseau seeks to put across the point that education should be based on espousing and exploring the natural abilities of a person (Rousseau & Allan, 1979: 37). In his argument, he presupposes that the role and natural responsibility of women is care giving, so their education should be in line with helping them enhance their caring abilities. Mary Wollstonecraft, another enlightened woman, author, and philosopher, agrees with Rousseau partly that women are born caregivers and her choice of response is based on the fact that by providing equal education opportunities to the girl child, their natural responsibility is enhanced even further. In the book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft advocates better rights and education opportunities for women. Her argument is drawn from writings by other authors, using them to drive her point home. As she travels through time in her writings, the reader is introduced to the various incidences that depict the prejudice and discrimination that has for years been directed to women. The story of the boy brought up in a natural state brings forth the educational doctrines that Rousseau harbored. This paper will show why Wollstonecraft's idea is worth considering, in that it points the way past and out of a world of discrimination to create nondiscriminatory educational concept for future generation.

2. Rousseau's "order in nature" education

In Rousseau's ideas on education, he advocates for a concept of "negative education" that focuses on the child (Rousseau & Allan, 1979: 9, 10). Rousseau writes, "Thus, the first education out to be purely negative. It consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error" (Rousseau & Allan, 1979: 93). His argument is that the education of a child should be carried in alignment with their natural capacities other than social prescriptions (Rousseau & Allan, 1979: 52, 94, 184). In chapter five of *Emile*, Rousseau outlines and presents his theories and concepts of the perfect education for women. The passionate feelings harbored by Rousseau to the various women in his confession can be attributed to the development of his ideas and concepts of women education. His ideas are developed and shaped by the various women he encountered as he grows up.

Rousseau also borrowed heavily from philosophers and thinkers before him. A great deal of his arguments accrues from John Locke, but he also manages to bring forth a comprehensive and coherent system on the education of women. Rousseau was of the idea that nature created and gifted man and woman in a way that should be considered when educating and teaching. He limits the role of women to that of caring and "[h]ence her education must, in this respect, be different from man's education" (Jean-Jacques, 2013: 393). Rousseau's

attitude on women as dependent on men comes when he said, “A woman's education must be planned in relation to man... and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his” (Jean-Jacques, 2013: 393, 399).

In as much as Wollstonecraft applauded Rousseau's scheme for Emile, she still deplored the discrimination and neglect that is brought out by the idea of a perfect wife for Emile. Wollstonecraft discovers that the main reason for the neglect and discrimination of women through ages remains the lack of education. In her attack and criticism to other authors, she singles out the poor account of women that Rousseau presents in his treatise. She says, “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper” (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 89).

3. Women education as non-relative to men

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is largely attributed to the influences and arguments from *Emile*. The argument by Wollstonecraft is built on the premise of intellectual equality being the onset of economic and political equality. Wollstonecraft tackles a number of key issues in her book regarding women education. For instance, she asserts that school going children require the company of their age mates. Her constant assertion that national establishments are required to allow education matters to be removed from the single-sided parental choice is major step in granting quality in education. The concept of nationalizing education allows the states and governments to create policies and allocate resources that foster education equality (See Wollstonecraft, 1792: Chapter XII). Her arguments and criticism bring forth important issues in the pursuits of equitable education opportunities across the gender divide.

The single most radical idea that Wollstonecraft proposes in the context of her advocacy is that education of the girl child should not be relative to the boys' education but rather alongside one another. She quotes Rousseau to assert, “The education of the women should always be relative to the men” (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 159). Wollstonecraft goes further to address the idea and concept of fear among men regarding the empowerment of a woman.

Arguing that the reason behind women discrimination from men accrues from the fear of female capabilities, she creates a platform for men to re-evaluate their position regarding the education of the girl child. Wollstonecraft agrees with Rousseau that leisure and objectification define the purpose of a woman. She, however, goes further to argue that, being that as it may, education should be granted to both males and females to allow for the proper fulfillment of duties and roles.

At the time of publication, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was seen as revolutionary and radical. In as much as her work elicited an uproar and criticism from various fronts, it stood the test of time and remains of significant influence in western feminism. By using the arguments for women being designated as caregivers by nature, she argued that by allowing education to the women, they would be empowered to be better caregivers. She says: “Though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfill the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence” (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 237). From the onset of the French Revolution and the death of Wollstonecraft, her ideas and arguments came under savage attack.

Needless to say, the contemporary education circles and feminism advocates attribute a greater education impact to have accrued from her ideas. The concepts of teaching through the exploitation of natural curiosity, practical applications, and public education can be traced to Rousseau and Wollstonecraft. However, on a larger scale, Wollstonecraft's radical idea that the education of men and women should be conducted together did stand out in shaping and mapping the educational path for women.

The education system that is exercised and practiced currently does not utilize the idea of naturalization. It, however, focuses on educating both the girl and boy child on a level platform. Education, in essence, has become a constitutional right for every child. The contemporary education system denotes a heavy connotation of the concepts and ideas by Wollstonecraft. As we look around from the past two decades to the present, the Western world has produced instrumental women throughout different fields of education and practice. Few women to mention may include Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, whose leadership ability has considerably impacted the economic policies of Germany. Forbes ranks her the world's most powerful woman from the last eight years. Times Magazine selected her as the person of the year 2015. Hilary Clinton remains an influential political figure in the Democratic Party of the United States. Ruth Dreifuss, of Switzerland, was the first woman to become the president of the Swiss Confederation in 1999. The effect of women education cuts across

continents thereby indicating Wollstonecraft's role in defining the mapping of education, more so for the woman. Rousseau may be significant, in many respects, of the educational reforms; however, Wollstonecraft is more significant today to women education than Rousseau.

On converging the ideas between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau, something that quickly stands out is that both of them emphasize on children being allowed to play freely. Rousseau asserts, "Love childhood, indulge its sport, its pleasures, its delightful instincts... As soon as they are aware of the joy of life, let them rejoice in it, so that whenever God calls them they may not die without having tasted the joy of life" (Jean-Jacques, 2013: 50). Wollstonecraft on the other hand wrote, "Reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy, might fill up the day; but these pursuits should never encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air" (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 264). Both of them agree that a child has a fundamental nature and desire to activity, and that it is through the activity impulse that their mental and bodily activity is developed.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, we have come to see how Rousseau and Wollstonecraft share in common certain type of education for children. Both regard the importance of education and also the freewill of children to grow within proper atmospheric conditions for their wellbeing. Whereas Rousseau elevated the male sex as the subject of educational experience and that the female's education must incorporate within it their natural abilities to serve men and care for children, Wollstonecraft decried such mode of discriminatory education, and advanced an argument in defense of girl child education. Wollstonecraft believed that Rousseau's prescription is dangerous since it denigrates and artificializes the girl child as an object of pleasure for men. The current state of education in relation to the time and setting of the authors discussed in this paper portends a fulfillment of their ideas and concepts. Education of the girl child has been given preeminence with the advancement of time. A great deal of the concepts and changes can be attributed to the Wollstonecraft-Rousseau debate. Critically important is also the realization that education of women today in the context of the two authors, Wollstonecraft has a more profound impact on the education of women in the contemporary society. Future research will continue to showcase women's education especially when both the population and performance in education between girls and boys are bridging up closely. Wollstonecraft will continue to occupy an important place in academic research for her role played in the champion of women education.

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Biography

Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi, originally from Ghana, began his theological studies from Valley View University (2002-2007), Accra, Ghana. He served as a district pastor with the Central Ghana Conference of Seventh-day Adventist from 2006-2010. He holds a Master of Theology (MTh) degree from the interfaculty universities of Lausanne and Geneva, and is currently a PhD student at the Theology department of the University of Geneva. His PhD research is focused on pneumatology, and Akan ethnography.